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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the American Council on the Speaking of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Speaking Proficiency Guidelines. The history and development of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (originally, the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines) are reviewed, the generic characteristics of each level of the speaking guidelines are presented in detail, and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), a face-to-face speaking test, is described. Additional information is provided on how to learn more about the ACTFL Guidelines and the OPI, and a 12-item bibliography is included. (VWL)

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ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines

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In 1952, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote a memo to the Dean of the Language School of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), calling for the creation of criteria that could be used to identify the foreign language proficiency of U.S. Government Employees. According to the memo, the criteria should be able to differentiate testable levels between "no knowledge" of the foreign language and "total mastery." A committee, consisting of representatives of government agencies concerned with foreign languages, was established by the Civil Service Commission to develop definitions for each of these testable levels of proficiency and to create an inventory of employees with foreign language proficiency in the various agencies. The result of this effort was a scale, numbered 0-5, with a brief definition of the proficiency associated with each point. These 1952 definitions were field tested and substantially revised in 1956. That same year, the FSI established a policy of rating the language proficiency of all foreign service officers according to these definitions. Although they have subsequently undergone a number of revisions, the definitions of the different levels of speaking proficiency, which consist of one- or two-paragraph descriptions, have remained essentially the same. This system of categorizing language proficiency was then adopted by all U.S. Government agencies, from the Peace Corps to the Defense Department (Sollenberger, 1978; Wilds, 1975). Today the government scale is known as the Federal Interagency Language Roundtable (FILR) Skill Level Definitions and is available in Higgs (1984) and Duran et al. (1985).

ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines.

In the early 1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the FILR began working on an adaptation of the government's proficiency scale to be used in secondary schools and colleges. The result of that collaboration, the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, was published in 1982. These guidelines made a number of changes in the Government scale, yet were designed to be commensurate with it. First, the numerical designations of points on the scale were replaced with names that represent each level. Second, a further subdivision was made within the two lowest levels on the scale. Thus, level 0 was renamed Novice and subdivided into Novice Low, Novice Mid, and Novice High, while level 1 was renamed Intermediate and subdivided into Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, and Intermediate High. Level 2 was renamed Advanced, and levels 3, 4, and 5 on the Government scale were combined into a single level called Superior, because data had shown that few university graduates reach even level 3. Following their publication, the Guidelines were widely distributed for comment throughout the foreign language teaching profession. Several hundred individuals were later trained to administer a face-to-face speaking test to assign one of the proficiency levels defined in the Guidelines to each person tested. As a result of their field testing, the guidelines were determined to be an appropriate scale for assessing language proficiency among secondary and college-level students of foreign languages. Thus, following minor revisions, the word Provisional was removed, and the scale was republished in 1986 as the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. They are available today from a number of different sources (e.g., Byrnes et al., 1986; Liskin-Gasparro, 1987).

Speaking Proficiency Guidelines

Generic Characteristics of Each Level. As indicated above, the Guidelines define four main levels of language proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. The characteristics of each level for speaking are as follows.

- Novice—The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally in highly predictable common daily situations with previously learned words and phrases. The Novice level speaker has difficulty communicating with even those accustomed to interacting with nonnative speakers.
- Intermediate—The Intermediate level is characterized by the ability to combine learned elements of language creatively, though primarily in a reactive mode. The Intermediate level speaker can initiate, minimally sustain, and close basic communicative tasks. The speaker can ask and answer questions and can speak in discrete sentences and strings of sentences on topics that are either autobiographical or related primarily to his or her immediate environment.
- Advanced—The Advanced level is characterized by the ability to converse fluently and in a clearly participatory fashion. The speaker can accomplish a wide variety of communicative tasks and can describe and narrate events in the present, past, and future, organizing thoughts, when appropriate, into paragraph-like discourse. At this level, the speaker can discuss concrete and factual topics of personal and public interest in most informal and formal conversations and can be easily understood by listeners unaccustomed to nonnative speakers.
- Superior—The Superior level is characterized by the ability to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Using extended discourse, the speaker can explain in detail, hypothesize on concrete and abstract topics, and support or defend opinions on controversial matters.

High Levels. When a learner fulfills most but not all of the basic characteristics of a given level, he or she is assigned a rating immédiately below the level in question, but with the designation "High." Thus, a person who fulfills most but not all the requirements

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of the Superior level is rated as Advanced High. Similarly, a person who exhibits most but not all of the basic characteristics of the Advanced level may be rated as Intermediate High, and a person who exhibits most but not all of the characteristics of the Intermediate level may be rated Novice High. The Government scale refers to these levels as "Plus" levels, and, by analogy, the 1986 ACTFL Guidelines listed an Advanced Plus level. However, in 1989, the name of this level was changed to Advanced High in order to be consistent with the High designation that can be obtained at the Novice and Intermediate levels.

Language-Specific Guidelines

As indicated above, certain changes were made in the Provisional Guidelines between 1982 and 1986. These changes were due in part to concerns about the applicability of the Provisional Guidelines to languages other than Spanish, French, German, and Italian. The Provisional Guidelines made reference to the learner's accuracy in using common Western grammatical constructions, such as subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement, tenses, and passives. These constructions either do not exist or do not pose a problem in the learning of many non-Western languages taught in U.S. schools, such as Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic. As a result, specific mention of these constructions was eliminated from the 1986 version. At the same time, a series of language-specific guidelines was developed through grants from the U.S. Department of Education. These guidelines include considerable detail regarding learner accuracy in using specific constructions of that language at each level. Initially, committees were formed to work on language-specific guidelines in Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic. A draft of the guidelines in each language was published or circulated, and comments were invited from other teachers of the language. Subsequently, they were revised and republished (ACTFL, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1989, 1990). Today, additional language-specific guidelines are under development or exist as circulating drafts for Hebrew, Korean, Hausa, Indonesian, and a number of other languages. These guidelines have exerted considerable influence on the organization of curriculum as well as on the pedagogical approaches employed by instructors in the classroom (Thompson et al., 1988).

The Oral Proficiency Interview

Both the FILR Skill Level Descriptions and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are rating scales. Traditionally, individuals have been rated on these scales through a face-to-face speaking test known as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The OPI is a structured conversation between a specially trained interviewer and an interviewee. The conversation may last from 10 to 25 minutes.

The OPI progresses through four stages. It begins with a Warm-up, which is designed to put the interviewee at ease and to aid the interviewer in making a very tentative estimate of the speaker's level of proficiency. During phase two, the Level Checks, the interviewer guides the conversation through a number of topics. The purpose of the Level Check is to verify the tentative estimate arrived at during the Warm-up, and to permit the speaker to demonstrate the level of language that can be handled with confidence and accuracy. During phase three, the Probes, the interviewer raises the level of the conversation to determine the limitations in the speaker's proficiency or to demonstrate that the speaker can communicate effectively at a higher level of language. Interviews alternate several times between the Level Checks and Probes. The purpose of the final phase, the Wind-Down, is to put the speaker at ease by returning to a level of conversation that the speaker can handle comfortably.

How to Learn More about the Guidelines and the OPI

There are a number of ways to learn more about the Guidelines and the OPI. First, one can obtain the familiarization kit developed by Judith Liskin-Gasparro (1987). Parallel versions of the kit exist for Spanish, French, German, and English as a second language. The kits include a book explaining the Guidelines and the OPI, and one sample interview at each of the four major levels. By listening to the interviews, the interested individual can become familiar with how the OPI is conducted and how the Guidelines are applied. For more thorough training, possibly leading to certification as an oral proficiency tester, one can participate in a 4-5 day tester training workshop. These workshops are offered by ACTFL several times a year at locations throughout the U.S. Occasionally, they are offered abroad. Information on upcoming workshops is available in *Foreign Language Annals* or from ACTFL (914-963-8830).

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